The Voice of the Russian Peasant

By Maurice G. Hindus

Drawings from Russian Posters

Since days immemorial there has existed in the Russian village the institution of *khodoki*. Literally, the word means walkers, and applies to persons sent by a village to the national capital with complaints that the local authorities have either refused to consider or have met to the dissatisfaction of the peasants. In former times the *khodoki* were often obliged to make the journey, however long, on foot; hence the word *khodok*, walker. With their papers and documents tucked away inside their hats or hidden in a pouch somewhere on their bodies, and with a linen sack of black bread on their backs, they would start on their arduous trip, which might last from one to six months, stopping at wayside inns and monasteries for rest and prayer. When they reached the big city they had to shift for themselves as best they could.

War, revolution, plague, famine, have not destroyed this ancient institution. *Khodoki* from all parts of the land continue to pour into the capital. But now, when they come to Moscow, they no longer need to wander about the bewildering streets in search of shelter and counsel. They can go to the Central Peasant Home, established especially for their benefit. The home occupies an imposing structure of four stories on a quiet side street in the very heart of the city. It has a dormitory with over three hundred beds; a rest-room; a library; a theater with stage equipment for movies, spoken plays, concerts; an enormous reception-room, which, with its upholstered chairs, curtained windows, mirrors,

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pictures, and smooth, freshly polished floor, makes one think of a ball-room in a fashionable hotel.

What struck me especially as I went from room to room and floor to floor were the numerous cards with neatly printed health maxims hung on the walls in conspicuous places at almost every step.

"You don't have such things in hotels in your country," observed my guide, a youthful, athletic, blue-eyed communist; "you don't need them. Your people go to school and grow habituated from childhood to hygienic practices. But our rural masses are terribly ignorant. So when the *khodoki* come here, we not only want to provide for them a healthful place to live and render them all the aid we can to locate the proper authorities and get their complaints heard and adjusted, but we want to teach them simple rules of health."

Though in existence only ten months, the Central Peasant Home is now known all over Soviet Russia. Other cities are opening similar hostelries. It is a world in itself. Under its roof gather peasant representatives from all ends of the far-flung Soviet republics, men of varied breed, race, faith, tongue, and dress, each bringing with him the plaints and the wishes and the hopes of hundreds and often thousands of neighbors. To spend a few days in this home is to feel the very throb of the peasant's heart.

Here was a peasant from the province of Ryazan, a little man with a big bald head, and a bushy mustache that covered his large mouth and spread like a sieve over his unshaved chin. A majority of the people in his village are of small families, a minority of large ones. He represents the minority, which has a serious grievance against the majority. Since days of old, land allotments in his village have been based upon the number of *yedoki* (eaters) in each family. At the redivision of land this year the majority have ruled that plowed ground shall be distributed in accordance with established custom, but that, in the case of meadows, each small family shall receive an increment equivalent to the share of two *yedoki*.

"I am of a large family," he complained to the attendant in the reception office. "There are fifteen of us, father, mother, three brothers, their wives and children. We all live together. We have never had enough meadow for our own need, and if the new ruling of the majority in the village stands, we shall have even less this year, and that is unjust and contrary to the Soviet laws. Here,"—and from his bosom he pulled out a paper-covered book, turned to a page and pointed to a paragraph heavily underscored with red ink,—"this is article 117 of the new Soviet laws, and according to this provision no village has a right to distribute land upon any basis other than the actual number of *yedoki*. The minority of us, peasants with large families, have protested the act of the majority to the local Soviet. But it did not do us any good. So they have sent me here."

The attendant filled out a blank for him and then sent him into an inside room to consult the *yurist*—lawyer.

Next appeared a young woman with a sunburned, bony face and heavy chin. She was rather comfortably dressed for a peasant in present-day Russia, with a white shawl on her head, a long black coat, heavy brown shoes,

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with gray socks falling over the tops. Her legs were bare, quite in the latest Moscow style. She was the wife of a former soldier in the Red army. For nine years her husband has been in military service, having fought with the Reds all through the Civil War. Recently his brothers have divided the estate left by their father. To her husband's share fell a few dessiatines of land, but no buildings except a barn, and no stock or implements. He could not settle on this land, for surely he could not be expected to live in an old barn with a leaky roof and crumbling walls. And they have a newly born baby, too. So he came to Moscow and got a job, hoping to save enough in a short time to build a little hut and provide himself with some implements. But the peasants in the village held a meeting and decided that insomuch as he was not working his land, he had forfeited his right to it, and have taken it away from him. "How could the Soviet Government allow such an injustice to a man who was ready to give his life for it?" she complained.

Next came two men, both with beards, swarthy of face, with black, rolling eyes. Both wore tall sheepskin hats, which, unlike the other *khodoki*, they did not remove as they sat down to present their case. They might pass for Tatars, Armenians, Hindus, or some other Oriental people. They were Jews from Daghestan—Sephardim. For three hundred years their sect has been living in the Caucasus. There are now eight communities of them, five agricultural, three commercial. These came from an agricultural village, where none of the people has ever engaged in trade. Before the Revolution they were all well-to-do, had land, camels, goats, cows. Even the old Government did not repress them, though they were Jews. When the Revolution came and the Soviets rose to power, they at once declared for the Soviets. Then the Tatars began to persecute them, robbed them of their stock and implements, visited their houses and smeared everything inside with pork, hoping that they would then leave, and they could move into the vacant homes. The Jews did leave, but before doing so they burned their houses. Now, upon invitation of the local Soviets, they had gone back to their native village, but they were utterly destitute. They had no stock or implements. Most of them had not even rags on their backs. Their women had to remain indoors; they could not go out with their bodies uncovered. The local Soviets had no means of helping them, and advised them to appeal to Moscow for aid. The older man pulled out a bundle of papers, yellow, crumpled, and held together by a linen thread, and offered it to the attendant. They were documents written by hand by the local Soviets completely substantiating their story.

Then came a youth in bast sandals, with leather straps tied about his legs up to the knees. He had a pleasant face, and deep-blue eyes overhung by long lashes. His short jacket seemed as if made from a pile of soiled rags. He was from the province of Smolensk, eighteen years of age, the oldest in a family of seven. His father was a poor peasant, with no land except a garden, with only one horse, over twenty-one, one cow also very old, a few hens, but no pig, no sheep. The one they had had died only a short

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Educational poster. The sad story of the illiterate peasant. The crop fails, the cow dies, he gets lost in town, finally dies unattended because he cannot write his absent son

time before. He wanted to enter the *rabfac,* or working-man's high school, where tuition and board and lodging would be furnished him free. He did not know what he wanted to study for, but he did not want to remain a dark peasant. He wanted to be enlightened. From his bosom he pulled out a bundle of papers, also written by hand—documents from the local Soviet recommending him for admission to the school.

Another youth appeared with a thin, freckled face and restless, searching eyes. His blouse and trousers were tattered and smelly. He was barefooted. His boots he had sold to buy a ticket to Moscow. He was sixteen, and he talked in a halting, feeble, but melodious, voice, almost like a girl. He had come all the way from northern Archangel, from the arctic region. He, too, wanted to enter the *rabfac;* he simply must enter it. All his life he had been dreaming about going to the university and being a learned man. There was no high school in his village, unfortunately. There was one about thirty-five miles away, and he attended it until he was fourteen. Then the boarding-house in connection with the school closed, and he had to quit; his father could not support him away from home. He read books all the time, especially poetry. He wrote verses himself; nothing he loved better than to write. He had been writing ever since he could remember, mostly poems, and every one he had composed he knew by heart. Some he had not even written down on paper. Oh, no, he would not forget them; he never forgot. Would we care to have him read his verses? He began a poem about a night in an arctic village.

The attendant was moved by the spirit of the boy, and leaned over and whispered in my ear:

"Have you heard of Lomonosov, the founder of our Russian literature? He, too, came from Archangel, ran away from home to go to school. Who knows but this boy is another Lomonosov? If only we were not so poor! The commissary of education has allotted to us only fifty places in the Moscow *Rabfac,* and we have already received over three hundred applications, and more are coming in every day. Such splendid chaps, some from far-away villages buried somewhere in the wilderness, selling their boots and their coats to buy railroad tickets to Moscow! It breaks our hearts to turn them back, but what can we do? We are so poor!"

As I left the room, two peasants

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The story is quite different when the peasant knows how to read

followed me and stopped me on the stairway. They were deputies from a village on the shores of the Kama, in the province of Kazan. There were about 150 families in their village, half Tatars, half Russians, all peasants and poor, because of several years' drought. If it were not for the Americans coming in and feeding them, they might have starved long ago. Americans were still feeding them. *Nu*, the local Soviet had all of a sudden decided to turn their village into a city, and what did they, peasants, want a city for? True, there was a good harbor in their village, and in former times it was a big receiving-station for grain. But of what good was their harbor now, when their crops had burned? They had protested the action of the Soviet, but the latter would not recede from its position, and if their village was turned into a city, they would have to pay taxes, which only a landlord under the czar could stand. The Soviet had given them three days' notice in which to comply with the new order and pay their increased taxes; otherwise it would sell their stock, what was left of it, and other things, and they would be completely ruined. Could n't I do something for them?

I told them that I was a foreigner and had nothing to do with the Soviet Government. They bowed and apologized profusely. They did not know; they saw me sitting at the table, writing and asking questions, and they thought I was an official. I must forgive them.

§ 2

On a Sunday evening a group of peasants invited me to come to their room for tea and a *beseda*—talk. It had been raining hard all day, and it was chilly, and when I arrived at the *dom* the attendant asked if he could send other peasants in to join in the conversation. They had been inside all day, he said, on account of the weather, and were lonely, and it would divert them to talk things over with an American.

They were all silently looking at me, as though expecting that I would open the conversation. I proposed that they tell me of life in their villages, but they insisted that I first tell them of life in America, especially on the American farm, how peasants work the land there, what crops they raise, what manner of homes they have.

I told them of the origin of America, the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, the settling of the West, the growth of industry, the development of agriculture, the type and manner of farming in the Western States. They

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listened intently without a word of interruption, and when I finished, they asked for the privilege of questioning.

A man with a red beard wanted to know if they had sandals like his in America, and if the farmers there wore such old *khalats* as the one he had on. And had they cold rains in America lasting for days and weeks as in Moscow? Had not the Americans yet invented a machine that could either start or stop rains? When they had a drought there did people go about with icons and a priest swinging incense and praying for a rainfall? Did they make *samogonka* (home-brew) in America, and did the Government send to jail those caught making it, as the Soviets are doing? Had they thieves in America? Horse-thieves, too? Did they ever sentence thieves to be shot? No? Ah! And what was America's attitude toward Russia? Was she willing to bring the czar and the *pomiestchiks* back to power, as were France and England? No? *Molodiets* America! (Hurrah for America!) Had they many communists there? Were not even the working-men communists? Why not? Still, they were going to have a communist revolution there, were they not? The whole world will have communist revolutions.

At this point I told them that it was now their turn to inform me of life in their villages. A fair enough proposition, they agreed, and asked what particular aspects of their life I was especially interested in. I suggested several things, among them, if they had or wanted to have communes, where all should work the land together and own everything in common. At first there was silence. I wondered if they were afraid to express themselves. I had been told in Stockholm and in Helsingfors that the peasants were too terror-stricken to talk openly. Is it really true? One American correspondent who had just come out of Russia had even assured me that the Bolsheviki would not permit me to mingle with peasants. I looked at them and wondered. Then came a voice:

"You tell America to send us tractors and automobiles and big boots, and then we 'll have communes. But now, well, I can only talk of how the peasants in our village feel, and they don't want a commune."

Of a sudden there was a hubbub, a clamor, everybody talking at once, one trying to out-yell the other, and all apparently seeking to address me. They waited, evidently, for some one to start the discussion and then they were all eager to talk themselves out at once. The red-haired peasant in sandals jumped to his feet and clapped violently with his hands:

"*Tovarishtshui! tovarishtshui!*" he shouted. "Quiet! quiet! Not all at a time. How do you expect our American *tovarishtsh* to hear you? 'Sh-sh! 'sh-sh!" To my amazement, they all ceased talking at once, and then their eyes turned upon the red-haired man. He chided them for their disorderliness and begged them to talk one at a time.

"As for me," he continued, "I have served in the Red army three years; in all, I have been under arms for seven years. I am thirty-nine already and still unmarried. I live with my brother and his family, and I know everybody in our village. If I had my way about it, there would be no Russia and no America and no Germany, but only one big commune, with every-

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body friends with everybody else. But, citizens, the truth is, that man is a funny creature. Why, in our village the peasants have not even drawn their manure out in the fields; heaps of it lie about their buildings. Why should we bother improving our land, they say, if it is likely to be taken away from us and turned into a commune?"

"And in our village," pursued another, "the women are bitter against communes. I was arguing once with my sister-in-law, trying to prove to her that life would be more pleasant and comfortable for her in a commune than it is now, and she said: 'I 'll never join a commune; to the devil with the commune! Here am I with only one baby, and across the street is my neighbor Agapa with three babies. I take milk in the morning for only one baby, and Agapa takes for three. I buy cloth for a garment for only one baby, and Agapa for three. She needs three times as much for her children as I do for mine, but I have to work just as hard as she, so of what benefit is the commune to me?' I tried to argue with her further, and said: 'But supposing in six or seven years you have five or six children and Agapa only her three? Then you will need more and she less.' But she only shook her head and replied: 'But supposing I don't? Supposing I have only one child?' 'Then,' I said, 'when your child grows up it will make only one worker, and when hers grow up they will make three workers, and produce so much more for the good of all.' And do you suppose she was convinced? No. She only grew excited and said she wondered how I, a sensible man, could reason like that? Did I not know that when her child grew up it would consume only as one person, and that when Agapa's three grew up they would consume as three, and even though they should produce three times as much, neither I nor my child would be benefited, because they would consume three times as much?"

At my right stood a Tatar, bald and gray, with a dusky face and with big, dark eyes set deep in their sockets. His left arm was cut off at the elbow, and he had been leaning all the time over the table, his head resting on his right hand, listening in silence. He was by far the best-dressed man in the room, with a long, black frock and freshly greased boots. He looked more like a merchant than a peasant.

"And now, citizens," he began in a deep voice and with an earnestness that commanded every one's undivided attention, "I want to say a word. The citizen who has just spoken is right. The women will never accept the commune. In the first place, they are more religious than the men, and they know that the Communist party is not friendly to religion, and though they can join a commune and not be of the Communist party, they will be afraid lest the commune become a part of the party and attack religion. Our Mohammedan women are very much afraid of that. And, in the second place, women are a peculiar breed. They are more selfish and jealous than men. It is so much harder for them to get along together than it is for men. Here am I, sixty-five years old. I have a brother seventy-five. From the day of our birth until just one year ago we lived together, and shared everything alike. He took care of the farm, and I did a little trading. We always trusted each other, never said an unfriendly word one to the other.

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One of the educational posters designed for peasants. A farm-yard as it too often is

And it happened that we both had daughters-in-law, and they could not agree, always quarreling and fighting and accusing each other of all manner of misdemeanors. And now my old brother and I, so devoted to each other, and both so old,—think of it, he seventy-five and I sixty-five,—and now we have to live separately on account of our daughters-in-law. Women can never live on good terms with one another in the same commune."

All the men seemed to nod in assent.

"Men really are not much better," said a school-teacher, a pock-marked, genial man of about thirty-five. "When we are in school, we all seem alike, friendly to one another and ready to do anything we can for one another. And when we get into the world, one is a priest, one a physician, one a merchant, one a teacher, and each becomes an altogether different personality, and follows a path all his own. And when we are soldiers, privates in the ranks, we are all alike, and when one of us becomes a sergeant, he feels himself superior and wants to have an orderly to shine his boots. And when one of us is made a manager of a *sovkhos* (a Soviet government farm) his head is turned, and he wants other peasants to kiss his hand as though he were a landlord under the old order. The truth to tell, human nature is a beastly thing; the mind dictates one thing, and the feelings urge man into quite another."

§ 3

"And have you heard of our *sovkhosy?*" a young fellow at my side asked.

"Yes, yes, let us tell him about our *sovkhosy*," several voices chimed in.

"What is there to tell about them?" asked a ragged man with a heavy beard. "The *Sovkhos* near our villages charges us twelve poods of bread for the service of the bull. Think of it, twelve poods!"

"He is only supposed to charge two and a half," said a bright-eyed youth. "I am a manager of about half a dozen in Tsaritzin, and we never charge more than two and a half poods."

A hubbub again. Nearly everybody talked excitedly, denouncing the *sovkhosy*. It was evident that this was a sore point with the peasants. Again the red-haired man in sandals attempted to calm them, and at last succeeded, whereupon the bright-eyed youth from Tsaritzin said, his voice throbbing with indignation:

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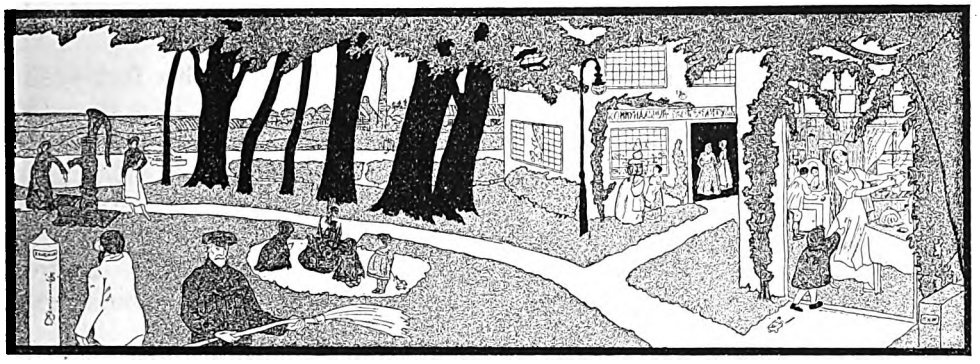

As it should be

"*Tovarishtshui*, peasants! Once for all you have got to get away from the idea that you are to receive alms from the Government. What is the Government? It is you and the proletarian—"

"It is not," a loud voice interrupted. "If it were, we 'd have as much voting power as the city worker; but the constitution does not give us the same voting power. If I remember correctly, five peasants have no more voting power than one proletarian."

"Don't interrupt," the *sovkhos* manager begged. "I 'll explain that, too." His face was flushed, and his large black eyes seemed abnormally extended and shone like cups of wine.

"You must not think that there is a clash between the interests of the city worker and us, people from the village. There is no clash; there is only an identity of interests. If the city proletarian has proportionately more power than we, then remember that he is more cultivated than we. If it were not for him, the old pesky *pomiestshiks* would still be swishing their whips over your backs. Is not that so? Who gave his blood for the overthrow of the old gang, the peasant or the proletarian? If we, peasants, were not such dark people, we 'd have our share of power. We 'd take it, and nobody could stop us, because we are, after all, in the vast majority. But we are dark and inexperienced. If we were at the helm of things in Russia, England and France would long ago have cut us into pieces and devoured us. We have got to have men of wisdom and experience to defend our Government. Right or wrong? Now if any manager of a *sovkhos* is cruel or arbitrary, file a complaint against him. And if you get no reply or satisfaction, file another or send a deputy to Moscow. Our trouble to set this right is that we have so few capable men. Don't imagine that it is easy to manage a *sovkhos*. It is not. It requires experience, foresight, knowledge, diligence, to operate a big farm of several thousand dessiatines, hundreds of head of stock, all manner of machinery, and scores of laborers. We have not yet developed men capable of holding such positions. And so the Soviet Government has been compelled to hire former managers of big estates to fill them, and some of these men are haughty and brutal, and often forget that they no longer are in the employ of a *pomiest-*

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chik under the czarist government. But do not allow them to ride over you. Complain against them, and they will be discharged and jailed."

"That 's exactly what we have come to Moscow for," the teacher explained. "The manager of our *sovkhos* is a *svolotch* [blackguard]. One day a group of our people were returning from town, and on their way stopped to rest on the banks of the river that flows through the *sovkhos*, and the old devil shouted at them to get away, and when they refused, he actually took a gun and fired. And he would n't allow our children to bathe in the stream. That 's the kind of man he is."

"Very well," remarked the youth from Tzaritzin, "report him, and he 'll get into a cell sooner than he dreams."

From the end of the room came a feeble voice. The speaker was a blond youth, tall and vigorous and smooth-shaved.

"You are all complaining about the *sovkhosy*, and I want to tell you that the one we have has been a blessing to us. The manager is all the time telling us useful things, and last year, when our crops were poor and we had no decent grain for seed, he exchanged our shrunk for good seed and hardly charged us anything. When the *sovkhos* was first started in our village, our people grumbled. They had expected that the estate of the German *pomiestchik* would be divided among them and they 'd have more land. But now they are glad it has been turned into a *sovkhos*, for they say, 'Of what use would it have been to us to have more land if we had continued to work it as unproductively as formerly?' Thanks to the *sovkhos*, we are now raising good crops."

"That 's the way the *sovkhos* should be all over."

The Tatar was on his feet again.

"There is something else, *tovarishtshui*. The proletarian has not been fair with us. He is overcharging us for everything he is selling us and is underpaying us for everything we sell him. Take our village. Do you know, before the war we could get a pood of cast-iron for a pood of bread; both were seventy-five copecks a pood. And now for our bread we get only twenty millions a pood, and for cast-iron we pay sixty millions. If the proletarian is our friend, as he claims to be, why is he charging us three times as much proportionately as did the merchants under the old order?"

"It is still worse in our village in the province of Kursk. There we get for bread thirty millions a pood and for an *arshin* [about a yard] of cloth we pay one hundred and twenty millions."

"I 'll explain why that is so," broke in the youth from Tzaritzin.

"We are such a dark people, we do not realize the difference in conditions under the old and the new régime. Take your land. You are producing on the average about as much per dessiatine as in the old times, but the factory is ruined. War and blockade have all but destroyed it. We are lucky to produce one fifth as much as we did in the pre-war days. And the less cast-iron there is for the same amount of grain as in the pre-war times, the more grain it takes, of course, to buy it. Is not that clear? But let us wait until we come to ourselves and put our industry upon a big productive basis, as it is in the land of our *tovarishtsh*, the American. Then everything will become cheaper than it has ever been."

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I switched the conversation to another aspect of the question.

"You are all complaining of one thing and another," I said, "but do you think you 'd be better off if the old government had been still in power?"

Then came a wave of loud protests: *"Nyet! nyet!"* ["No! no!"]

"Nobody wants the old gang back, do we, *tovarishtshui?*" said the teacher.

"Would we ever have a place like this to stay when we came to Moscow if the *pomiestchiks* had been still ruling over us? Why, if we got near to this building, they 'd drive us off like dogs."

"And do you know what happened in our village?" said a youth with flashing eyes, from the province in Homel. "Our German landlord had a highway of his own side by side with our public highway, and if ever one of us peasants got on his highway, his guards would immediately drive us off, and once a stranger from a distant village drove over it and did not hear the guard shouting at him, and the guard shot and killed his horse, and nothing was done about it."

"And in our village," began another, "no peasant was allowed to enter the landlord's forest. Some of us were so poor we could not pay for fuel, and there was wood, broken trees and stray branches, in the forest rotting, and we could not have it, and if one of us ever tried to pick it up by stealth, it was a lashing, and then several years in jail. Nor could we ever go there to pick berries or mushrooms unless we paid for it, and now we can pick all the berries and mushrooms we want free."

"I agree with my *tovarishtshui* in all they say about the old power," said one of the older men, with a fuzzy beard and a babyish flush on his face. "I come from the Caucasus, from the territory of Kuban. I and my three sons have been in the Red army for three years, and if anything happened and we had another war, we 'd all join again voluntarily, and my fourteen-year-old son would go with us."

"Let 's not talk about war," said the teacher. "Let us hope we are all through with it. Tell your American people we Russian peasants are a peace-loving race. We want to be friends with everybody, but if England and France are going to send tanks and soldiers here, as they did when Yudenitch was making his drive on Petrograd or when Wrangel and the other *pomiestchik* generals were trying to fight themselves into power again, we won't be lying idle. There are more of us than of the English and the French, and do you know the kind of soldier our muzhik is? You shoot at him with cannons, and he 'll march right on and fight with his bayonet."

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